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Sculptural Seating

Harrison designer Giovanni Pagnotta's distinctive chairs are stronger than steel, lighter than a newborn, and cooler than le corb.

BY SUSAN HODARA

Photography by John Rizzo



Pagnotta and his carbon fiber Vortex chair.

Giovanni Pagnotta owns two cars. One is a silver Land Rover LR3, an SUV that accommodates outings with his wife, their seven-year-old son, and sometimes Pagnotta's parents, who live five minutes from his home in Harrison. Then there's his Maserati Coupé GT, also silver, sleek, alluring, and powerful.

These two cars epitomize the dual forces that fuel Pagnotta's life. An industrial designer known for his modernistic and innovative home furnishings, Pagnotta, 46, is very much the family man. "I am one-thousand percent committed to my family," he says. "I am very close to my parents. And it's important to me that my son is close to his grandparents. He often tells me, 'Tonight I want to have dinner at Nonna's.'"

As for the Maserati, it calls to mind Pagnotta's collections: tables so thin they nearly vanish, light fixtures that blend sharp angles and elegant curves, chairs that swoop and jut and seem to turn themselves inside out.

"What I'm trying to do with whatever I take on, whether it's a cup or a chair or a trash bin," he says, "is to make it an opportunity to give people a new way of seeing." Pagnotta's work has been exhibited at the Yale University Art Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio; last

year it was sold through the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan.

Born in Italy, Pagnotta, a trim man with dark, wavy hair combed back from his face, emigrated with his family to America—to Harrison, in fact—when he was four. There, his father became a stonemason. "From the time I was eight, I spent

my summers working with him," Pagnotta recalls. "So I was always building things. It has always been a part of what I did."

Yet his education skirted industrial design. After graduating from Harrison High School, he studied environmental design at Parsons The New School for Design. He then attended Yale University, where he was awarded the Eero Saarinen scholarship for design excellence and earned a master's in architecture. "My studies reflect a characteristic of mine. I don't generally take the linear path."

There are, however, numerous linear aspects of his designs. Consider the Z Chair, part of his Prototype collection from 2002: four lines, three angles—a Z-shape for sitting that is a feat of engineering. Like the rest of the Prototype collection, the Z Chair is constructed of solid carbon fiber, a material that is five times stronger than steel but only a quarter as heavy. The chair weighs 17 pounds; from the side, it is a mere .08 to .5 inches thick.

Pagnotta cites as influences designers Verner Panton and Gerrit Rietveld, whose Zig Zag Chair was an inspiration for the Z Chair. He describes his Prototype collection as "calligraphy." "It's all about simplicity of gesture," he says, "about how few moves it takes to create something that people understand." Prototype includes a chaise that resembles an elongated tilde, and a lounge chair that looks like a propped up smile.

Several years later, Pagnotta took his next step, creating the Vortex collection, again from carbon fiber. "With Vortex, I added another level of complexity. While the gestures are still simple, the idea was to optimize the use of the material." To that end, Pagnotta introduced curvature to increase strength. The Vortex Chair, a seemingly continuous succession of curves, weighs about half of the Z Chair.



The Z chair is Pagnotta's most famous design.

Materials are a critical element in his designs. "They excite me," he says. "They determine what I make." His fondness for carbon fiber, which was developed by the military in the 1960s for use in aircraft, lies in its extremes of strength and lightness.

But carbon fiber is expensive. The Z Chair retails for \$9,000, the Vortex for \$14,000. So with his next project, Pagnotta tackled cost. "How do we make it more affordable?" he says he asked himself. "We change the material. And by changing the material, we affect the design."

The Mi Chair, created in 2009, is similar to the Vortex chair in its flowing form and "volumetric gesture," but, says Pagnotta, "it's extremely different." Because it is fabricated from thermoplastic, it is heavier than the other chairs and has a hollow core. Plus, unlike most of Pagnotta's pieces, the Mi Chair is available in different colors. With it, Pagnotta achieved his aim: the Mi Chair will sell for under \$500.

Despite the differences among his collections, all of Pagnotta's pieces were designed with certain common goals, one of

which is durability. “They are virtually indestructible,” he says.



The Vortex Mini fit Vincenzo Pagnotta perfectly when he was a toddler.

A second trait is comfort—“a must,” Pagnotta says. “People don’t expect it, but the first thing they say when they sit down is, ‘Wow, this is one of the most comfortable chairs!’”

The Mi Chair is recyclable—a quality Pagnotta says was a prerequisite of design. “It’s incredibly important to me. I don’t want to make a bunch of things that end up in a landfill.” And an added bonus: it’s waterproof. “If you spill spaghetti on it, you can take it outside and hose it off.”

All of Pagnotta’s pieces are manufactured in the United States, a decision he made with conviction and pride. “If I were greedy, I’d be producing in China because it would be half the cost,” he says. “But the more interesting challenge is to find a way to make things here. People have become too complacent in taking the easy road. The United States used to be a center of innovation, and it still can be.”

Here in Westchester, Pagnotta is perpetually conceiving new designs. He recently consulted with a beverage company on bottle forms and is working on a series of lights using OLEDs (organic light emitting diodes). “They’re paper-thin, and they don’t generate any heat,” he says.

Pagnotta’s office is in the family’s home, where the decorating runs, predictably, to the contemporary. There’s an Eames chair and a table by Eileen Gray, not to mention a few of his own pieces. Pagnotta works at a glass-topped desk lit by a Dove lamp, one of his favorite

possessions.

Being Italian, Pagnotta said his family loves food—both eating and preparing it. “My wife is a fantastic cook,” he says, “chef quality. It makes staying thin a challenge.”

But, then again, Pagnotta thrives on challenges. “The world doesn’t need more chairs,” he says. “For me, the challenge is to make something that is a chair, but that is also something more: an object that exists on its own and occupies space as a sculpture, that isn’t just a piece of furniture, but a conversation starter that changes people’s points of view.”

Susan Hodara (susanhodara.com) is a journalist, memoirist, and teacher who writes frequently about the arts.